

INTRODUCTION

MARRIAGE among the Ngoni is much the same as anywhere else.⁵⁸¹ It establishes a relationship between a man and a woman, regulates their sexual activities, locates their children in the kinship system and influences the inheritance of their property. These general features, however, do no more than define and identify marriage, and distinguish marriage from concubinage. Our task¹²¹ is to analyse the particular features that distinguish Ngoni marriage from other marriage systems and to relate marriage to other institutions and social processes in Ngoni society.

In Ngoni history there has always been marriage. Indeed men and women look back longingly to a past when people married properly and decorously, and when adulterers were killed, and bemoan the promiscuity of the present when no woman's fidelity is certain. Yet even now old people still expect their juniors to marry and their expectations are fulfilled. Adults are assumed to be married, and the assumption is justified.⁵⁸¹¹⁸³

Marriage is seen by the Ngoni as part of the natural order. Unmarried adults cannot fill important roles and are regarded as overgrown children whose anomalous condition must be explained by reference to a malady or a physical or moral defect. Yet despite the universal and permanent character of marriage as an Ngoni institution there have been, in the course of the hundred and thirty years which constitute Ngoni history, great changes in the procedures and implications of marriage and in its relations to other aspects of the social life of which it is a part. These changes have been paralleled in other Ngoni institutions, in law, in local organization, in religion and above all in political structure. In this paper we shall attempt to contrast the institution of marriage as seen at two stages in Ngoni history and to relate it to the general plan of social life at these two periods. We shall also discuss some of the processes of change that have brought about the differences we observe and which to some extent are still at work in contemporary Ngoni society.⁵⁸⁹¹⁷⁸¹²¹

It is convenient to compare marriage as it was during the 1890's and as it is at the present day. The information relating to the earlier period is contained only to a slight extent in contemporary documents,¹²⁴¹²⁷ and consists largely in the recollections of older men and women as recorded by a number of writers from 1914 onwards. The

¹ The most important of these are Wiese's articles, 'Expedição portuguesa a M'Peene (1889)', in *Boletim da Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa*, x (1891) pp. 235-73, 331-430, 465-97, and xi (1892) pp. 373-599. (All page references cited are from Vol. X); and 'Beiträge zur Geschichte der Zulu im Norden des Zambezi, namentlich der Angoni,' *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, xxxii (1900), pp. 181-200.

[P.22]

CHAPTER III

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

1. *The field of modern marriage*

581 **M**ARRIAGE nowadays among the Ngoni still regulates the sexual activities of man and wife and determines the responsibility for the care of their young children, the inheritance of their property, and succession to office. To a lesser extent it still determines residence and establishes relationships between a partner to the marriage and his or her affines. It is an institution which involves sooner or later almost every Ngoni man or woman who survives into adulthood. The number of people who die adult and unmarried is very small. Even albinos, who are regarded generally with disgust, usually succeed in marrying. The only people who fail to marry at all are: seriously crippled people who are regarded as not strong enough to look after themselves; a few prostitutes who acquire a reputation for wantonness before they have managed to find a husband and who live in a succession of temporary alliances with men in and around the township of Fort Jameson; and a category of persons known as 'quite useless people',¹ that is, people who are mad or in some way deranged so that they are unable to settle down in any place and are always wandering about from village to village, begging shelter, beer and food.

[826] 589 [548] A man who does not marry, or who remains divorced or widowed for many years, is regarded as unusual, and others say of him that he must smell like a he-goat so that no woman will have him. A man in his twenties without a wife is laughed at by the married women, who despise him as impotent. Very few men in fact stay long without a wife, and of people whose personalities are regarded as normal it is only a few old widowers who do not have a wife to cook for them and sleep with them. Some women stay for longer without a husband, partly because of the numerical preponderance of women over men caused by labour migration.

[162] 128 Some idea of the extent to which marriage affects everyone sooner or later is given by Tables III and IV. These tables, like all the others in this paper, are based on information collected systematically from six Ngoni villages. Two of these villages, containing 257 and 142 residents, situated twenty-five miles apart and in different counties, were selected for me to live in by the county chiefs concerned. The remaining four villages containing 143, 104, 55 and 45 residents, were close together but in a third county and twenty miles away from the other two.

[821] ¹ *Cisilu*, pl. *visilu*, or else *wantu watyalatyala*. Cf. *Nsenga silu*, pl. *masilu*, idiot.

away from the other two. They were the four most accessible from my base camp, built at a site chosen by the Administration. I was able to compare their size, history, and kinship structure with those of many other villages I visited, and as far as I could tell they were in these respects fairly typical Ngoni villages. They form a sample of approximately one per cent of the whole of the Fort Jameson Ngoni. 121
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The tables in which the units are individuals or extant marriages (III, IV, IX, X, XIII and XIV) are based on the marital histories of the men and woman normally resident in those villages during the latter part of 1948, in one village, and during the earlier part of 1949 in the other five. In Tables I, II, V to VIII, XI and XII, where the units are marriages and not individuals, I have drawn on the histories of men and women who lived in these villages as wedded people for at least part of the time from 1946 to 1949. I endeavoured to interview the whole population but failed to do so for various reasons. I was however, able to determine who was, and who was not, a resident in these villages, and can therefore indicate the number of people who could have been included in this six-village sample had more been known about them. Some of my interviews were only partial. 124

In Tables V to VIII, which deal with the incidence and magnitude of marriage payments, each marriage is classified by the decade in which it began. This is not necessarily the decade in which the payment was made, for as we have noted payments are sometime made after many years of marriage. Unfortunately I do not have enough information to classify by the decade of payment.

In the tables I have used the word 'wedded' to refer to all people who had ever been married, whether or not they were currently married at the time of inquiry.

It will be seen from Table III that in this sample there was no unwedded man over the age of twenty-four, and, out of a total of 116 wedded men, there were only one widower and seven men whose last marriage had ended in divorce and who had not remarried. From Table IV we see that there was only one unwedded woman over the age of nineteen, but that there were as many as 31 widows who had not remarried. Only about a half, 122 out of 223, of the wedded women were living with their husbands. 162
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Marriage is then an experience that sooner or later comes to nearly every man or woman, although not every adult lives all the time in a simple family of procreation. Nevertheless, the ties forged by marriage remain, and the results of marriage extend beyond the wedding ceremony and beyond the domestic association of man and wife. It is the sexual activities of individuals that are most closely regulated by the fact of marriage. In succession to office and wealth, marriage, as we shall see, plays nowadays a permissive rather than a determining role. It is only by means of the symbolic acts which form part of marriage that a man can be reasonably sure of acquiring rights over his wife and the custody of his children. Yet he may, 581

581 on the one hand, acquire that custody without undertaking any of these symbolic acts, and on the other hand he may have full rights over his wife without ever getting control of his children.

2. Choice

582 Marriage involves choice and selection. There are prescribed 'preferential marriages' in the usual terminology, but as applied to the Ngoni this nomenclature is misleading, for, as in the old days, a woman who marries her cross-cousin does not have such high status in her husband's compound family as a wife who is not related to her husband. A man behaves in some respects towards his female cross-cousins as though they were his wives or potential wives, but it is incorrect to say that Ngoni men prefer to marry their cross-

Table III. Marital status of males by age, 1948-9

	Marital Status								
Age in years	Unwedded	Wedded							Total
		Number of wives						Total wedded men	
		0		1	2	3	Not known		
		Divorced men	Widowers						
0-4	51	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	51
5-9	61	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	61
10-14	55	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	55
15-19	28	1	-	2	-	-	-	3	31
20-24	14	-	-	6	-	-	-	6	20
25-29	-	2	-	13	-	-	1	16	16
30-34	-	1	-	7	-	-	-	8	8
35-39	-	-	-	13	3	1	-	17	17
40-44	-	-	-	4	2	2	-	8	8
45-49	-	-	-	8	-	-	1	9	9
50-54	-	1	-	4	-	-	1	6	6
55-59	-	-	-	8	1	-	1	10	10
60-64	-	-	-	9	2	-	-	11	11
65-69	-	1	1	6	1	1	-	10	10
70-74	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	3	3
75-79	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	2	2
Not known	-	-	-	1	-	-	6	7	7
Total	209	7	1	83	11	4	10	116	325

cousins. Whether a man decides to marry a cross-cousin or an unrelated woman, he still has to decide just exactly whom he will try to marry, and similarly a woman has also to make up her own mind about whom she will accept as husband. The initiative in choosing lies very largely with the couple themselves, and not with their parents and kinsmen. If a man is diffident about asking a woman to marry him, he may ask his father or elder brother to seek out a woman for him, or a woman may have a spouse presented to

Table IV. Marital status of females, by age, 1948-9

Age in years	Marital status							Total
	Unwedded	Wedded					Total wedded women	
		Divorced women living alone	Widows living alone	Divorced women living as concubines	Married women			
					HH	HA	HS	
0-4	58	-	-	-	-	-	-	58
5-9	65	-	-	-	-	-	-	65
10-14	54	-	-	-	-	-	-	54
15-19	20	-	1	-	14	9	1	45
20-24	-	3	-	-	10	11	-	24
25-29	-	1	-	1	17	8	1	29
30-34	1	-	-	-	14	8	-	23
35-39	-	-	-	-	19	3	1	23
40-44	-	2	1	-	13	1	1	18
45-49	-	-	2	-	13	2	-	17
50-54	-	3	-	-	7	3	1	14
55-59	-	1	5	-	6	-	1	13
60-64	-	1	8	-	3	1	1	15
65-69	-	2	8	-	1	-	-	11
70-74	-	-	5	-	1	-	-	6
75-79	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
80-84	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Not known	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	4
Total	198	14	31	1	122	46	7	421

Legend

HH (Husband at Home) Husband living within thirty miles of his wife, in a village, and not separated from her
 HA (Husband Away) Husband living permanently on a farm, or in Fort Jameson, or more than thirty miles away
 HS (Husband Separated) Husband living within thirty miles, in a village, but separated from his wife

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becomes her husband's *sibling* so that their marriage is then incestuous. I have recorded elsewhere²² an instance in which a man married his son's wife's mother. His son's wife left her husband, saying that she could not sleep with her *sibling*. In court the old man was ordered to give up his new wife and on that understanding his son's wife returned to her husband. Yet when I left the area two years later the man and his son were both living with their wives, despite the order of the court.

It is quarrelling, adultery and divorce that bring together the two groups of kin to deliberate. Quarrelling is usually between man and wife and arises from their personal life together. There are very few quarrels between the two groups of kin over the custody of the children or about the handing over or return of marriage payments. The custody of children is determined in theory by the payment of bridewealth. In practice a child stays with its mother until it is weaned and may then be sent to a grandparent. Here there is no argument, even in theory, that all the children should go to one grandparent or the other depending on bridewealth. Some people say that the proper thing to do is to send the first child to the man's mother, the second to his wife's mother, the third to the man's mother, the fourth to his wife's mother, and so on. This is not carried out in practice, and a child goes to live with whichever grandparent asks for it or is conveniently situated. Some old widows run households containing up to half a dozen grandchildren, real and classificatory, and others live alone or with one grandchild although there are many grandchildren available. A married man is concerned that he should not appear to favour his own relatives at the expense of his affines, and he endeavours to see that his children go to live where they will be welcomed and well looked after. As with children, so it is with presents. If he returns from work and gives his father a shirt, it will be prudent the next time to give a shirt to his wife's father. It is only when the marriage has broken up that the two sets of relatives may see themselves opposed against each other, each insistent on its own rights. Even then, there is little point in quarrelling about children. A child soon becomes 'wise enough' and can choose for itself. I recorded an exceptional instance in which a man aged about twenty moved from the village of his father's father, where he had been living, to his mother's father's village on the instructions of his kinsmen, who said that as his father had not paid bridewealth for his mother, he must follow his mother's kin and not his father's. This kind of move does not often occur, and although only one marriage in twenty is accompanied by the payment of bridewealth, many people settle in their fathers' villages.

8. Other Kinsfolk

We have so far discussed the role of kin in a marriage in terms of

²² See Barnes, *op. cit.* p. 232

he has not been brought up by them but by some other relative. In particular a man is reluctant to discuss his affairs directly with his father if he can get his eldest brother to act as his intermediary. The eldest brother is heir to their father and it is considered that he should act as the channel by which the father is approached. He deals with proposals of marriage arising from his younger siblings and if he approves of them, he refers the matter to their father. This pattern of relations seems most marked in aristocratic families. [184] 593

9. Widows

While it is a man's eldest brother who helps to arrange his marriage, it is his younger brothers who become pro-husbands to his widows. We have seen that in the old days a widow was usually looked after by a younger brother of the dead man but she continued to live in her dead husband's segment, and the children she bore by her pro-husband were grouped with the children of the dead man. This can still happen but it is no longer the invariable rule. As in the old days, if bridewealth has been paid by the first husband and after his death his widow goes to live with someone else, the second husband or pro-husband cannot offer bridewealth and the children he begets belong to the dead husband and take his descent name. 587 851

Some indication of the extent to which widows remain with their dead husbands' kin is given by data collected in two villages. All the women now living in these villages had between them experienced widowhood 31 times. In two instances (6 per cent) the widow had been cared for by her dead husband's brother; and in 11 instances (35 per cent) the widow took a new husband not directly related to the dead man. In the remaining 18 instances (58 per cent) the widow had not married again and was living alone. 581 [589] •

A man may die at any stage of his marriage. If he is betrothed to a girl and then dies, the betrothal passes to a younger brother. When the girl is old enough, the younger brother marries her as though she had been betrothed to him in the first place and the children he has by her are his own children. Similarly, if a betrothed girl dies before she is married, the betrothal passes to a younger sister. 584

If a man dies after he has been properly married his widows have definite roles to play. For a month after his death, they must wear the signs of mourning, and they are in danger of *mdulo* ²⁴ if they commit adultery during that time. They must be ready to wail when distant visitors arrive to mourn. At the end of a month they brew beer, and there is a joyous party. A year after the death there is another party, and the fate of the widows is discussed. If none of the younger brothers or kinsmen of the dead man wish to look after the widows, they are free to go their own way, and there may be a formal statement of divorce. They are in any case now spoken 765 589

²⁴ See above, p. 46.

- 589 of as being divorced from the dead man. If they do not themselves wish to be inherited they cannot be forced to remain.

589 If a widow is cared for by a younger brother of her dead husband, and that man already has a wife of his own, the widow is regarded as inferior in status to the man's own wife. Yet any children she has by him count as if they were children by the dead husband, and as such they inherit his cattle and offices before the brother's children by his own wife. This apparent paradox is due to the nature of Ngoni seniority. Seniority was always associated with position in a definite segment in the old residential system. The widow belongs to the segment of her dead husband, and even today if she is a queen she ought to stay there after she has been given a pro-husband. If she moves to live in proximity to her pro-husband, she comes into the ranking system of which the pro-husband's great wife is the superior. Her children are, however, still associated with the segment from whence she came.

589 The new husband, whether he is a kinsman of the dead man or not, pays one goat, also known as 'snuff-box', on taking the woman, and this animal she keeps herself, and does not hand on to her father or brother. If no bridewealth was paid by the first husband, the children borne to the second take the descent name of their own father and his rights in the marriage are the same as if he were marrying the woman for the first time and had made the legalization payment.

589 There is then an opportunity for the marriage to continue after the death of the man if his wife and his kinsmen are both agreeable. If the widow wishes to go her own way, she can do so, and if his kinsmen do not wish to care for her, they need not. Even if they do not like the woman they cannot turn her out of the village, and she can go on living in her dead husband's hut and cultivating the same garden as before. She may even re-marry and bring in her new husband to live with her in her dead spouse's village. The extent to which this can be done without quarrelling depends very much on the personalities of the people involved. If the widow decides to go back to her own village, her husband's kin may try to prevent her removing possessions of which the ownership is not certain, and she should discuss with them how much of the crops she can take away from her garden.

589 Nowadays the death of a wife brings the marriage to an end. We have seen that in the old days the dead woman was replaced by a linked co-wife, and that this institution has now all but disappeared. There is no other form of sororate, and although a man may sometimes in jest address his wife's sister as *wife*, he has no rights over her.

593 The specific responsibilities of brothers towards a man's marriage are demonstrated in the role of the elder brother as a marriage negotiator and of the younger brother as potential husbands for a man's widows. A man would not, save in exceptional circumstances,

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Women wear their cloth folded across the upper level of the breasts from right to left. Men and women often have two cloths, one over the loins, only the second fastening over the chest.

A menstruating woman also wears a small piece of calico corresponding to a diaper supported by string round the waist.¹ The same thing is worn after childbirth for six months. Angoni women always wear them.

The Angoni, Chipeta wear their cloth toga-fashion, carrying a fold of cloth on the left arm. An Angoni chief wears three such, blue, white and coloured, the first outside, the last next to the skin.

The material used is now practically everywhere European-made calico, formerly bark cloth only was used by Nyanja, though weaving had been accomplished by Angoni, where skins were and are used as articles of clothing.

There is nothing to distinguish men of various grades, etc. Fashion at the present time is very capricious—some patterned cloth being much worn one month will have no sale a month later; this is true both of men and of women.

There is no class uniform, and no "costumes" are worn save in dancing (q.v.).

Men are now seen wearing a piece of calico twisted up on the head in turban form, a custom lately introduced from the coast—the only indigenous head-gear is the string skull-cap worn by Angoni widows.

Under the heading of dress must be included the bead aprons worn by Yao and Angoni. Among the former the use of this garment is restricted to the women, who in the house sometimes wear nothing else; among the Angoni the children often have them and no other clothing.

Sandals are sometimes made of skin and fastened on the feet with a thong when crossing thorny country.

Among Angoni the *mwade* only used to be worn; this is a small hard-cased fruit which was hollowed out and worn just covering the glans penis.

Food, etc.

The staple food throughout the country is either maize or rice, the latter only at various spots on the lake shore where it can be grown. Two fixed meals per diem are taken, at 9 or 10 a.m. and again at 6 p.m.; each consists of *nsima* porridge made from maize flour or rice flour or boiled rice with some *nsima* (relish) to which the salt is added. At odd times the native will eat anything that opportunity offers—a piece of cassava root, a boiled sweet potato, a roasted maize cob, etc.

The *nsima* is made by stirring flour (u/s) into boiling water till a stiff paste is formed; this is kept cooking for five minutes and then scraped out with a wooden

¹ Diaper = *mitoko*: a woman keeps five or six; they are never put away in baskets but always hung up; a woman changes every time she bathes, using two or three per diem; they may be given to a female child to wear, but are then not worn again by a woman.